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ABSTRACT

Despite their impact on literary criticism, contemporary theories of reader response and deconstruction seem to have had little effect on the practice of teaching literature, and most teachers of introductory literature courses remain vague about what these "new" theories are and how they can be used. Proponents of some of these theories argue that there is a text fixed permanently in the world, with secrets waiting to be unlocked by the perceptive reader able to decipher its code. Other theorists contend that the text is rendered wildly unstable either by the vagaries of human personality or by the whims of the community that interprets it. A more useful theory is that "the story" is in fact central to the reader's involvement with a work of fiction, that it is what determines the reader's engagement with and interpretation of the literary text and that students need to be invited into the process of story telling. In particular, stories about story telling can be helpful because they are metaphors for the reader-writer relationship and demonstrate how essential writers know their readers to be in both the making and the interpretation of a literary work. The struggle stories such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and Grace Paley's "A Conversation with my Father" suggest the struggle individuals are always engaged in to negotiate textual territory as tellers and listeners, while trying to respect the author's property rights as people stake out their readerly claim. (Twenty-six references are attached.) (MS)

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Half Someone Else's: Theories, Stories, and the
Conversation of Literature

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The word in language is half someone else's.

Mikhail Bakhtin

"Discourse in the Novel"

A novel or a poem is not a monologue, but a conversation of a writer with a reader ... And in the moment of conversation a writer is equal to a reader, as well as the other way around, regardless of whether the writer is a great one or not.

Joseph Brodsky

"Uncommon Visage," The Nobel Lecture

"My God, I'm doing it with Madame Bovary!" Kugelmass whispered to himself. "Me, who failed freshman English."

Woody Allen

"The Kugelmass Episode"

In "The Kugelmass Episode" a discontented humanities professor, greedy for distraction from the trials of his daily life and unsatisfactory marriage, enters a magic box, into which Persky the magician has tossed a copy of Madame Bovary, and is transported to nineteenth century Normandy, where he proceeds to talk with, indeed make love to Emma Bovary. For a while he is able to pass freely, with Persky's help, across time and page, and between fiction and real life, but trouble begins when, having successfully brought Emma to twentieth century Manhattan, Persky encounters technical difficulties with the magic box and cannot get Emma back to her proper fictional place. Kugelmass is eventually - and we might assume interminably - trapped within the pages of a textbook.

One way to read the story is as a comic turn on the fairy tale formula that begins with the granting of an exorbitant wish and ends with the hero sadder and wiser about the perils and disappointments of wish fulfillment. But another reading might highlight the fact that Kugelmass is a professor of humanities and that what he wishes for - and is granted - is romance, a love affair with a fictional female. From this, we might take his adventure to be a cautionary tale, a humorous warning about the dangers lurking when readers venture too far beyond the borders that define the limits of readerly behavior and violate the etiquette of textual relations. It is with such textual relations, theoretical and actual, that I'll be concerned in this article.

In a recent issue of College English, Joseph Harris (1987) muses that contemporary theories of reader response and desconstruction, despite their impact on literary criticism, seem to have had little effect on the practice of teaching literature. In fact, he doubts that any theory of reading is likely to alter the way we teach literature to undergraduates. On the face of it, he seems to be right. Over the last several years, journals which focus on teaching literature and composition, I'm thinking here of College English and College Composition and Communication in particular, have indeed been filled with articles dealing with a wide range of issues raised by various critical theories and perspectives. And many of these pieces are attempts to close the gap between what we as professionals theorize amongst ourselves

and how we use what we learn, if we do so at all, in our classrooms. Recently, in fact, the question of putting literary theory into classroom practice seems to have become more urgent, or at least more fashionable. Johnson's *The Pedagogical Imperative* (1982) shows a number of literary texts to be metaphors for teaching, while Nelson's *Theory in the Classroom* (1986) explores ways to incorporate various theoretical positions into classroom practice. Robert Scholes' *Textual Power* (1985) deals specifically with classroom applications of literary theory, and several very useful articles, Harris' among them, take long strides toward what should be our goal of offering students the benefits of serious thought about the uses of literature and writing. Petrosky (1982), following David Bleich, has offered a heuristic for generating students' written responses to literary texts, as have Flynn (1983) and Petersen (1982). Roemer (1987), linking reader response theory with Freirian pedagogy has noted the conflicts that can surface when reader response theory is put into classroom practice. And Kathleen McCormick (1985) has created a reader-centered course designed to help students discover and analyze the assumptions that underlie and shape their interpretations of literary works. Still, despite these and other efforts to transform theory into practice, most teachers of introductory literature courses remain vague about what these "new" theories are, vaguer still about what use such theories might be in their introductory classes.

If we listen closely to the conversations held on the fringes of our classrooms, in the hallways and across the aisles before class begins, we can hear in our students' voices echoes of contemporary quarrels about the critical project of reading literary texts. We're all familiar with the basic attitudes most of our students bring to the introductory literature class. The first goes something like, "to get a good grade, you have to find out what the teacher's interpretation is, and that's not fair cause it's all subjective anyhow," a crude but pretty accurate version of the relativist position in which the meaning of a text is indeterminate, always subject to an infinite number of interpretations. This recognition of interpretive pluralism clashes with the belief inherent in the second position, reflected in this student's knowing remark: "Oh great, a story. Now we have to look for Christ symbols." This view holds that meaning resides in the text and that a single "right" interpretation is not only possible but ultimately desirable.

These are, of course, oversimplified statements of extreme points on what is actually a theoretical continuum. At one end, like critical blackbirds on a textual telephone pole, sit the heirs of the new critics, pondering a text fixed permanently in the world, its secrets waiting to be unlocked by the perceptive reader able to decipher its code, to "find the Christ symbols." On the other, perch those theorists who contemplate a text rendered wildly unstable either (according to the psychoanalytic and subjective theories of Holland or Bleich) by the vagaries of

human personality or, according to Stanley Fish and his followers, by the whims of the community which decides or is bidden to interpret it. (Whether one decides or is bidden depends in large measure, of course, upon whether scholars or students comprise the community.) Somewhere in the center are those such as Iser (1978) and Rosenblatt (1978) who hold reading to be a transaction in which individual readers are guided by the text to create a literary work, "the poem," as Rosenblatt has called it. At issue for them all are relations among readers and literary works. And as Jane Tomkins (1989) has pointed out, despite their apparent distance from one another, critics at both ends of the pole would agree that to specify meaning is the aim of the critical act, even if such an act ultimately determines that to specify meaning is impossible.

Reader response theory offers a range of intriguing possibilities regarding relationships among readers and literary texts, but what it often obscures is the fact that much of this theorizing is about stories. I'd like to propose that the lure of the story is in fact central to the reader's involvement with a work of fiction, that it is what determines the reader's engagement with and interpretation of the literary text. Like the critics, our students are also concerned with meaning, with "figuring it out," but if learning to read literature is to be more than merely a game, either of symbol hunting or of psyching out the professor, if it is to yield more than rigid or sloppily self indulgent readings, students need to be invited into the

process of story telling. For it is often in the very telling of a story that the relationship among the reader, the writer and the text is worked out.

Robert Scholes distinguishes between narrative and story.

A narration involves a selection of events for the telling. They must offer sufficient continuity of subject matter to make their chronological sequence significant, and they must be presented as having happened already. When the telling provides this sequence with a certain kind of shape and a certain level of human interest, we are in the presence not merely of narrative but of story. A story is a narrative with a certain very specific syntactic shape (beginning - middle- end, or situation - transformation - situation) and with a subject matter which allows for or encourages the projection of human values upon this material. (In Mitchell, 207)

Scholes goes on to posit three aspects of a story: the events, the text, and the interpretation, and to assert that these are always enacted in this necessary sequence. I would add that the very process of telling a story involves the ordering of events and assigning them an implicit meaning. Furthermore, certain stories dramatize in themselves the ways in which they transform events into story and in so doing suggest to the reader the role she is to play in that transformation.

Post structuralist theorists have been particularly captivated by those texts which appear to provide what Barbara Johnson (1987) has called "commentaries on their own production."

Texts have been seen (after deconstruction) as commentaries on their own production or reception through their pervasive thematization of textuality - the myriad letters, books, tombstones, wills, inscriptions, road signs, maps, birthmarks, tracks, footprints, textiles, tapestries, veils, sheets, brown-stockings, and self-abolishing laces that serve in one

way or another as figures for the text to be deciphered or unraveled or embroidered upon. (18)

Barbara Hardy (1987) has suggested that this tendency for fiction to be about the making of fiction reflects the essential narrative structure of human consciousness. (4) In any case, we've been encouraged to see narrative as being about narrative, that is to read stories as being about the telling and writing of stories-- as being, as de Man put it, "allegories of their own reading." They are often allegories of their own writing as well, and I'd like to suggest that we can use such stories to supplant the notion of the text as a secret code only English professors can decipher with an approach that sees the text as an invitation to interaction. I'd like to examine here a particular kind of self-consciousness in a particular kind of text - stories about story telling - and to suggest that these stories are themselves metaphors for the reader-writer relationship, that they demonstrate how essential writers know their readers to be in both the making and the interpretation of a literary work.

One of the ironies of reader response criticism is that in highlighting the role of readers and their encounters with literary works it has allowed the writer's role to become virtually a cipher in the textual equation. But if some theorists are content to let the writers of literary works become mere shadows lurking shiftily behind the stories they create and then must abandon, neither writers nor most readers, including most students, are quite so ready to relinquish the writer's

author-ity. As the title and quotes of this paper attest, I'm not the first to propose that the metaphor of the conversation captures the relationship which evolves when a reader encounters a work of literature. But conversations, while collaborative, are not always free of tension; on the contrary, they are often struggles for dominance. And it is this process, part friendly chat, part quarrel, that we see played out so frequently in fiction. Two quite different examples will illustrate here.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield" is the tale of a man who, one morning in the tenth year of his marriage, tells his wife he is going on a short journey, takes up residence in the block next to his own, and is not heard from again for the next twenty years, at which time he gets caught in the rain in front of his wife's house and re-enters it. There the tale ends. From its opening line, "Wakefield" invokes the complexities of story telling, calling our attention to the nature of the fictional enterprise. The narrator presents himself first as a reader of Wakefield's story, which he recalls coming upon in an old magazine or newspaper "told as truth," and then as both inventor and reader of Wakefield's behavior. And he lures the reader into the tale with the promise that together they may turn this barest outline of events into a story.

To my own contemplations, at least, it has often recurred, always exciting wonder, but with a sense that the story must be true, and a conception of its hero's character. Whenever any subject so forcibly affects the mind, time is well spent in thinking of it. If the reader choose, let him do

his own meditation; or if he prefer to ramble with me through the twenty years of Wakefield's vagary, I bid him welcome; trusting that there will be a pervading spirit and a moral, even should we fail to find them, done up neatly, and condensed into the final sentence. (75)

The narrator makes two promises. First, he strongly suggests that this tale will have a moral, and this vow, as we shall see, he keeps. But he also promises to welcome the reader's participation in the process of trying to understand "his hero's character," and on this pledge he appears to renege. In fact, although the reader is addressed directly at various moments throughout the tale, the narrator remains firmly in charge, constructing a tale that almost willfully tries to keep the reader out.

Ironically, "Wakefield," which the narrator construes as a story about a man who has lost his "reciprocal influence on events," and which begins with an invitation to reciprocity between narrator and reader, in fact shows this to be a problem. While the narrator explicitly invites our participation, we are often absented from the text in much the same way as Wakefield himself is. And although the narrator invites the reader to come along and invent with him, calling the story "our business," in fact he resists collaborating with the reader, insisting upon his authority in several ways. First, he speaks directly to Wakefield, scolding him on several occasions.

Poor Wakefield! Little knowest thou thine own
insignificance in this great world! No mortal
eye but mine has traced thee. Go quietly to
thy bed, foolish man; and on the morrow, if
thou wilt be wise, get thee home to good

Mrs. Wakefield, and tell her the truth. ... (77)

He also instructs, readily assuming the privilege of omniscience. "Thought has always its efficacy," he reminds us, "and every striking incident its moral," (75) as he supplies the rationale for meditating on Wakefield's "vagary." And he moralises. "It is perilous to make a chasm in human affections: not that they gape so long and wide- but so quickly close again!" he warns Wakefield. He tells us that "an influence beyond our control lays its strong hand on every deed which we do, and weaves its consequences into an iron tissue of necessity." (78) And as he brings Wakefield home, he sermonizes, "Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever." (80) Finally, the narrator withholds. We never get more than the barest hint of motivation for his behavior. There is no dialogue in the story; we never hear Wakefield's voice, never hear his wife's reaction to his departure or to his return. The narrator leaps over ten years of Wakefield's absence, and when he finally puts Wakefield at the doorstep of his home, refuses to allow us to cross the threshold. Instead, he leaves us with "food for thought," a portion of which he shapes into the moral, the other portion of which, presumably, is ours to chew.

Morals, of course, are the province of fables and parables and there is much to suggest that "Wakefield" can in fact be

taken as a parable - the sermonizing, the mere outline of character and event, the fact that a moral is what, after all, the narrator promises at the start, the moral itself. And like many of Hawthorne's tales, this one works as a parable of the danger of disengagement, of the risk an individual assumes in daring to step aside from daily life and ordinary human concerns. But at the very beginning, the narrator offers two choices - to come along with him or to meditate by ourselves. What follows is an enticement, a story built on the assumption that we have indeed chosen to accompany him, to engage in the storytelling. When we do, we get the moral, which makes the story a closed text to which the meaning has already been assigned. In an essay called "The Story Teller," Walter Benjamin asserts that it is in the nature of every real story to contain, openly or covertly, something useful - a moral, some practical advice, even a maxim or proverb. Story tellers, says Benjamin, have counsel for their readers. But he also observes that "it is half the art of story telling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it," to leave it to the reader to "interpret things the way he understands them..." (89) Closed texts, those whose morals, we might say are overt, may offer the comfort of certainty, but they beg the question of interpretation, close off the difficulties and pleasures of ambiguity. The alternative seems to be that we do our own meditating, a choice "Wakefield's" narrator resists, as if to grant us openness is to turn ownership of the story over to its readers.

And in fact "Wakefield" works as a parable of readers, writers and story telling. It is in effect a series of interlocking stories. A news "story" prompts the telling of Wakefield's story by the narrator, who is himself engaged in the story of constructing a narrative with the reader and narrator its protagonists. As the narrator imagines him, Wakefield shares certain attributes of authorship. Though a pallid man of meager imagination, Wakefield has a "disposition to craft" and sets in motion a story in which he has contrived to become the main character and for which he wants to be remembered. Similarly, the narrator, presumably telling Wakefield's story, is very much a presence in the tale. Wakefield makes his mark on the world only by being absent, just as the writer is virtually absent from a story after he has composed it. "Wakefield" is a story filled with allusions to reading and writing, to seeing but rarely to understanding, to texts. Wakefield's aspect is said to bear "the handwriting of no common fate, for such as have the skill to read it." (78) We are invited on several occasions to "read" Wakefield's "crafty smile." The narrator, always conscious that he is constructing a story, wishes he had "a folio to write, instead of an article of a dozen pages!" (78) Wakefield himself is said not to "have words." There are multiple references to glimpsing and gazing, and a pattern of images depicting slightly open doors, shadows of faces reflected in half light, and windows; Mrs. Wakefield is represented as a reader of Wakefield's character who "interrogates him with a look," as Wakefield

himself becomes a text for us to read and try to understand. Wakefield walks out on life and then spies on it, allegorizing the act of reading.

A tale filled with playful inconsistencies and ambiguities, "Wakefield" is a story at odds with itself, at once defining itself as a quest to understand, that is to interpret Wakefield's behavior, and closing off the possibility of interpretation by substituting a well wrought moral in its stead. To ask, as the narrator does, "why did an ordinary man disappear for twenty years?" is to pose a question about meaning. In a discussion of another Hawthorne tale, "The Minister's Black Veil," Barbara Johnson has suggested that the real question to ask of that story is not what Hooper's veil means but instead what it means to ask that question, that is, to examine the act of interpretation. (in Atkins and Johnson, 147)

Faced with an inexplicable fact, "Wakefield's" narrator constructs a story. The story itself is an effort to understand, a metaphor for the the conversation of reader and writer and for the interpretive process. But in its ambivalence over how much to reveal it suggests that full understanding is impossible. On the one hand, this is tantamount to denying the possibility of interpretation. "Wakefield" itself insists upon ambiguity, and the narrator's failure to disclose highlights the reader's responsibility for interpretation. This is a problem for the narrator, who wants to maintain control. But if the reader is a participant in the transforming of event into story, to use

Scholes' terms, then she must also be a participant in the process of interpretation. Meaning cannot be the sole province of the writer. Thus, what appears to be a text closed by the narrator remains in fact open to the imagination of the reader, whether the narrator likes it or not.

If Hawthorne's tale is implicitly about story telling, Grace Paley's "A Conversation with my Father" is explicitly so. The conversation of the title is enacted literally as the making of a story, one which mirrors the clash between traditional and contemporary notions of story-telling as well as the dialogue with tradition in which the innovator is always engaged. And if "Wakefield" begins as an offhand invitation to a reader, Paley's story is offered as a gift, the narrator's response to her dying father's request that his writer-daughter tell him a story, "...a simple story ... the kind de Maupassant wrote, or Chekov ... just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next." (167)

At first the narrator responds with a tale very much in the minimalist mode, with the barest outlines of a story - the mere narration of events.

Once in my time there was a woman and she had a son. They lived nicely, in a small apartment in Manhattan. This boy at about fifteen became a junkie, which is not unusual in our neighborhood. In order to maintain her close friendship with him, she became a junkie too. She said it was part of the youth culture, with which she felt very much at home. After a while, for a number of reasons, the boy gave it all up and left the city and his mother in disgust. Hopeless and alone, she grieved. We all visit her. (168)

Not surprisingly, the father is unsatisfied with what even the narrator calls an "unadorned and miserable tale." "You left everything out," he complains, and insists upon more, upon a real story. Obviously, "A Conversation with my Father" is more than one story. In fact, it is three: first, the story of the narrator and her father composing a story in his hospital room; second, it is the story they compose about her neighbor and the woman's son; finally, it is a story about readers and writers composing. What follows the father's complaint is an occasionally tense but always good natured collaborative venture in story telling, filled with wry good humor as father and daughter, reader and writer each vie for the right to define and preserve their notions of what a story should be. For the writer-daughter, a story must be open; it must allow for hope, one might say for interpretation. "Everyone, real or imagined, deserves the open destiny of life." For the reader-father, a story has a beginning, a middle and an end, and one of the story-teller's responsibilities is to fill in the blanks, describe the characters' appearance, record the details of their lives, account for the forces that shape existence, assign meaning.

As she attempts to oblige her father and to reconcile the demands of her reader with her writer's sense of story the narrator begins to fill in the canvas of her characters' lives, wielding her brush with generosity and irony, adding with successive strokes gifts of description, explanation, metaphor. The mother loves her son because she "has known him since birth."

She becomes an addict to keep him from feeling guilty, "(because guilt is the stony heart of nine tenths of all clinically diagnosed cancers in America today, she said.)" We learn that the woman is handsome and that the son is a young writer as well as a junkie, that their home becomes a haven for "intellectual junkies who knew what they were doing," that the son falls in love with a health food devotee for whom he gives up drugs and leaves his mother, alone with her addiction, crying out in anguish each time she is reminded of him.

It is at this critical moment in the telling that the father moves from being a skeptical reader, a critic of his daughter's narrative technique, to being a participant in the life of the story.

"Number one: You have a nice sense of humor. Number Two: I see you can't tell a plain story. So don't waste time."

Then he said sadly, "Number Three: I suppose that means she was alone, she was left like that, his mother. Alone, probably sick?"

I said, "Yes."

"Poor woman. Poor girl. ... The end. The end. You were right to put that down. The end." (172)

For the father, the reader, an ending, however tragic, means that interpretation, understanding, is possible. Once the story is complete, the reader is free to comment on it, to contemplate what it means. For the writer, it is not so simple. She resists.

I had promised the family to always let him have the last word when arguing, but in this case I had a different responsibility. That woman lives across the street. She's my knowledge and my invention.

I'm sorry for her. I'm not going to leave her there in that house crying. (Actually, neither would Life, which unlike me has no pity.) (173)

She refuses to leave the story there and so rewrites the ending once again, providing her hero with a "happy," open ending while her father assails her poor judgment.

But this is more than just a squabble about the nature of interpretation. The narrator has a very real stake in this particular story remaining open, for as long as it stays unfinished, as long as he remains an active participant in its creation, her father stays alive. If an open ended story without a conventional plot allows hope, a finished one stops time. The making of the fiction serves to keep her father alive, to forestall his death. If the story is a gift of life, its end signals that death is imminent. Once the narrator ends it, moreover, in a very real sense the story is no longer hers.

It is the father who has the last word in this story. And if this highlights the importance of the reader's responsibility in the act of story telling, it also underscores the writer's reluctance to abandon what she has made. As much as it is a metaphor for how stories get written and understood, "A Conversation with my Father" is also a trope for the writer's struggle to claim some part of the story as hers, for if story-telling is an act of creation, it is also an act of surrender on two levels. First, to the story itself.

Actually, that's the trouble with stories. People start out fantastic. You think they're extraordinary, but it turns out as the work goes along, they're just average with a good education. Sometimes the other way

around, the person's a kind of dumb innocent, but he outwits you and you can't even think of an ending good enough. (169)

And then to the control of the reader who is at once the occasion for the story and holds the power to make it his own.

As father and daughter try to construct a story that satisfies them both, try to resolve their conflict as artists who love the story form but have different notions of what it should be, they dramatize the conversation between reader and writer, sometimes reciprocal, sometimes contentious, as they struggle to own the stories they make. And if she allows her reader-father the last word in this conversation - "How long will it be?" he asked. "Tragedy! you too. When will you look it in the face?" - his version of a moral, readers would be wise to note that it is the writer of "A Conversation with my Father" who leaves the endings of both stories open.

As dissimilar as "Wakefield" and "A Conversation with My Father" appear to be, certain correspondences between their stories make Hawthorne and Paley unlikely bookfellows. Both stories purport to begin with fact. Both are quite self conscious of themselves as narratives. Both address the reader directly, although in different ways, just as both enact the tension inherent in the reader-writer conversation, as the writer in each at once welcomes, indeed depends upon the reader's engagement and resists his power to usurp the story. The writer is central to both these stories, as important as the reader and the text itself. In this regard they offer a subtle corrective

to the tendency of some post structuralist theories to displace the writer from contemporary study, a consequence with special irony for those of us who teach writing alongside literature. It's a little hard, after all, to accept the death of the author when we're trying to introduce students to ways of becoming authors themselves. But, as Sharon Crowley has pointed out, "Post structuralist thought - for all of its avowed occulting of the author - assumes that writing is a manifestation of desire, is a reach for author-ity. Invention begins in the encounter with one's own text or with those of others ... The notion that authors exert control over at least their own textuality appears implicitly in post structural writing in its tendency to mess with the conventions of writing..." (In Atkins and Johnson, 98) And, we might add, in the tendency of even pre-post structural writing, to embody them. We look to reinstate the authority of the writer not to discover a Hirschian intention and thus a single valid and true meaning, but to highlight the complexities of the relations among text and writer which may be obscured in the critical focus on the reader. But authors don't forget, nor in their stories do they neglect these complexities.

Of course these, like other stories, are about more than story telling. Paley's is as much about generational struggle, familial and literary, as it is about the collaborative nature of narration. Hawthorne's is certainly as much about the mysteries and failures of human behavior as it is about the reader's troubling complicity in the shaping of events into story. But

these themes are inscribed within the larger thematic circle of understanding, and both stories mirror above all the desire for and resistance to interpretation, for both are about the stress of ambiguity and the difficulty of resolution. Despite the "counsel," either covert or obvious, they offer, both stories leave us with more questions than we began with and both suggest that it is the perpetual quest to understand that keeps us telling stories. I think it's no accident that the tension in both stories is most acutely felt in the struggle to assign meaning. Wayne Booth has said that narratives build in us patterns of desire. One such desire that narratives depend upon and reinforce is the desire to know, to understand. If, as Barbara Hardy insists, "Narrative... is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate and order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life," (1) fictions are nonetheless ways of representing the world; a story is, after all, a way of interpreting experience, is itself an act of interpretation. The real pleasure and pull of fiction is that however enigmatic a story may be, it teases us into participating in it with the promise that we know, with the promise of understanding. The process of interpretation is simply another stage in this "coming to know" that is the reading of stories. To deny, even as we accept the reality of interpretive pluralism, the possibility of this coming to knowledge is to deny the impulse that impels and sustains the act of reading for all of us.

In some important ways our students transcend the critical controversy that swirls around us and our books. They have no difficulty at all with the role of the writer; in fact they freely and often sensibly commit the intentional fallacy whenever they gather to discuss a literary work, assuming ingenuously (and perhaps even correctly) that what they've discovered in a story is what the author meant for them to see. It might help these readers to know that this posture is at least as sophisticated as one requiring either a hunt for Christ symbols or a radical suspicion of the text. As Barbara Hardy puts it, "To distrust the text may be the end of study ... but to distrust the text without ever having trusted it seems hollow or specious." (xi) Scholes explains in Textual Power that the reading of intentions "dominates the reading of human texts for a very good reason. Without a serious act of 'reading' - of a book, a face, or a tone of voice - we will never be able to agree or disagree with another person, since we will have turned all others into mirrors of ourselves." (40) Reading, he continues, as a submission to the intentions of another, what Booth in The Company we Keep calls the "act of assent," is the first step in all thought and all communication. It is no less essential for being only the first. Unlike Kugelmass, most of us know our readerly place; we choose not to violate the proprieties of the literary conversation, content instead to participate in the telling of stories at a distance safe enough to maintain the identities of everyone involved whenever we can.

It is true that stories about story telling reinforce post structuralist notions of the mutual referentiality of all discourse, and that in the telling they mirror the process of writing and reading, but it is also - and more significantly - true that in doing those things they mirror the process of coming to know. The struggle they enact between narrator and reader suggests the struggle we are always engaged in to negotiate textual territory as tellers and listeners, trying to respect the author's property rights as we stake out our readerly claim.

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